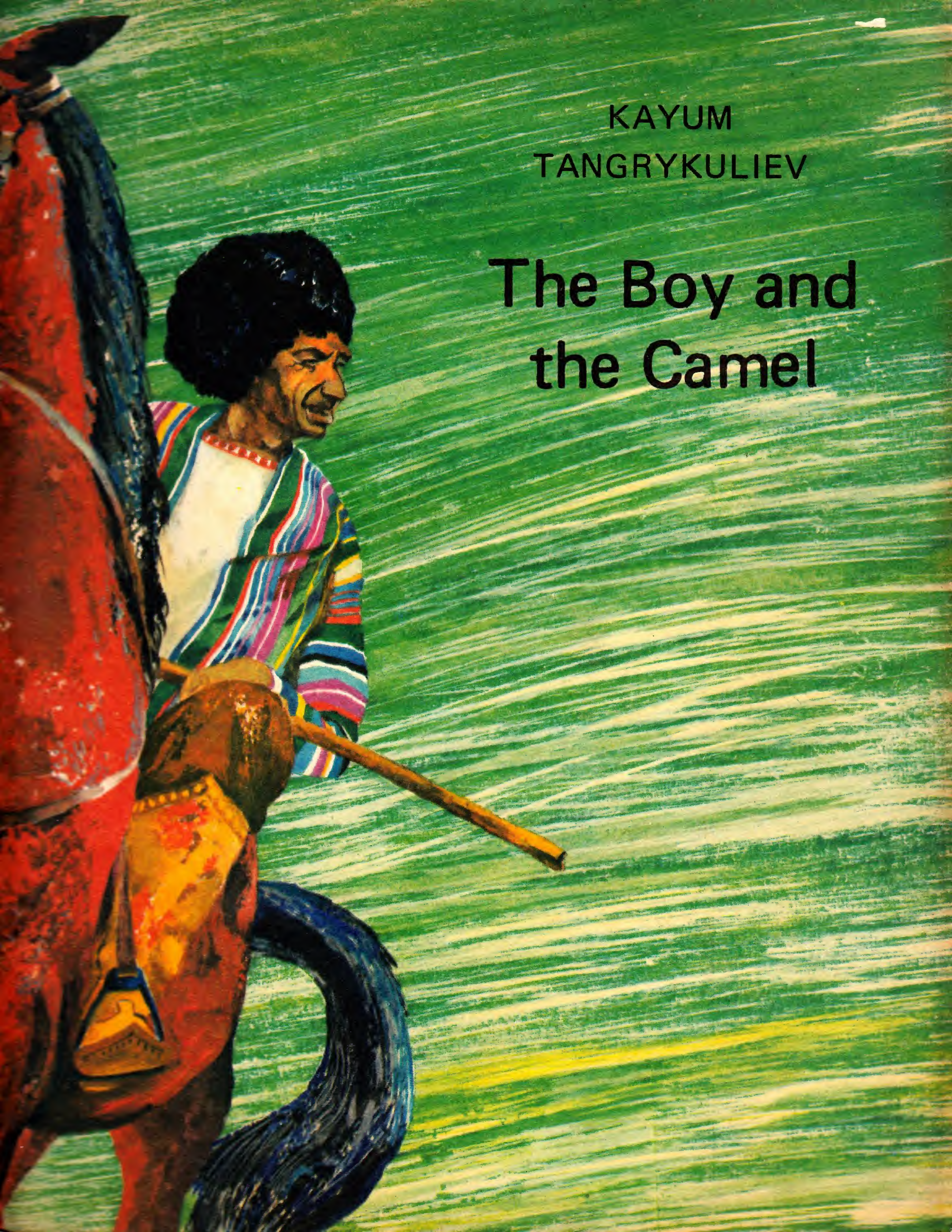


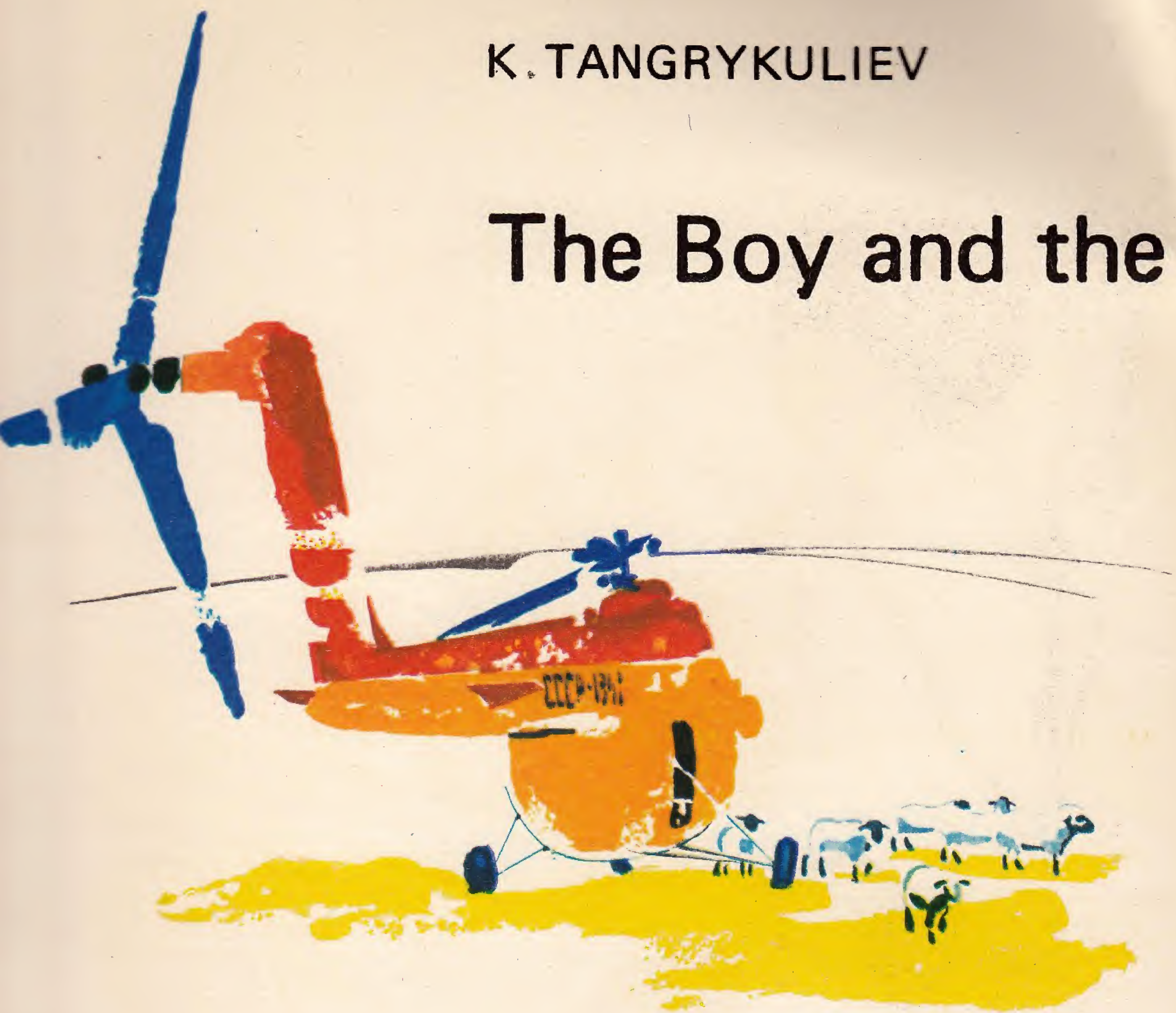
KAYUM
TANGRYKULIEV

The Boy and the Camel



K. TANGRYKULIEV

The Boy and the



Illustrated by S.E. Zaryansky
Translated by Jim Riordan

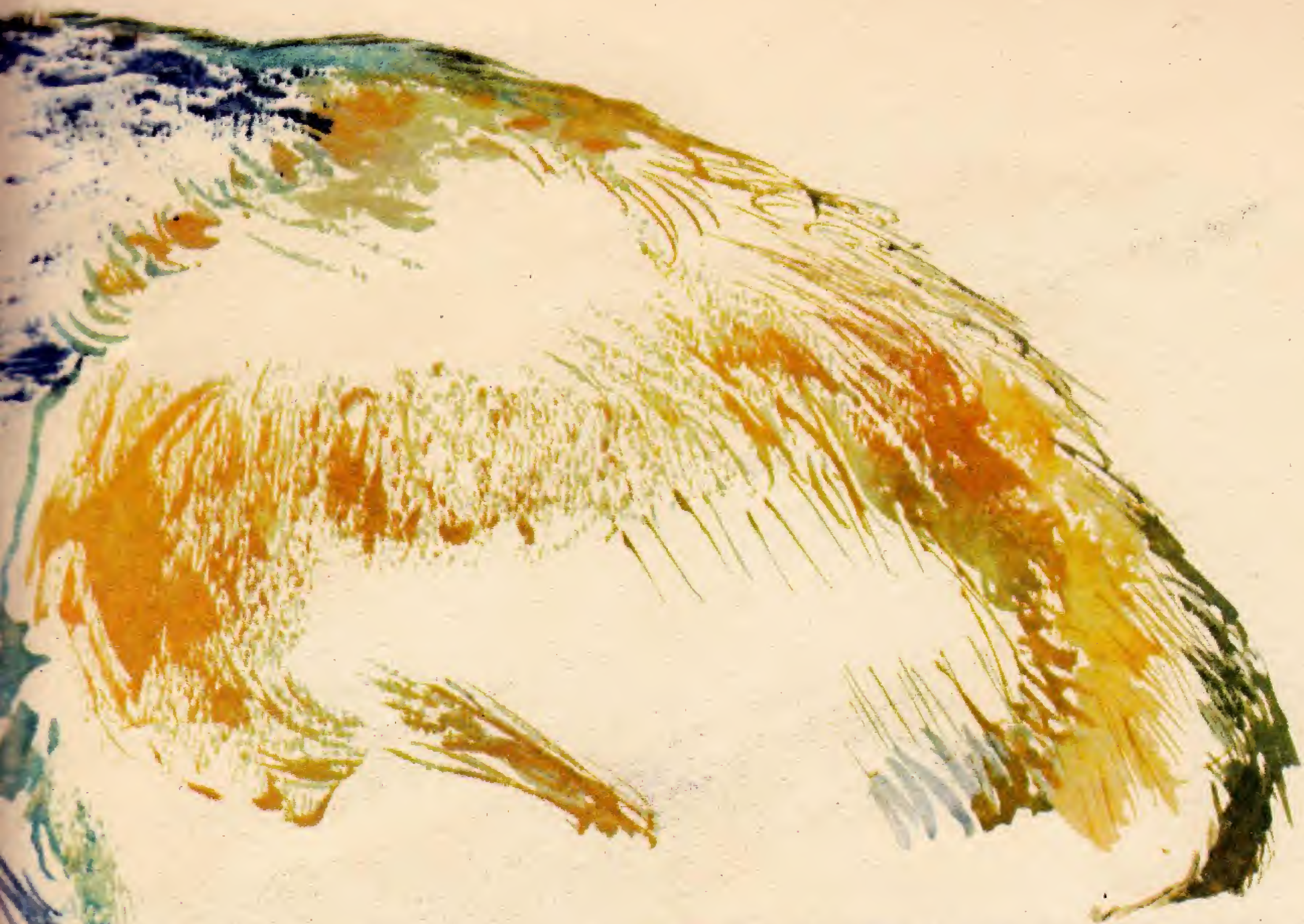


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Camel







THE SHEPHERD'S DOG

The shepherd stood alone in the desert, his boy having gone to the village for fresh provisions. But the sands held no fears for the old Turkmen, not as long as he had his trusty gun and faithful dog by his side; they would fend off any attack by wolves.

Leaning pensively upon his crook, the shepherd suddenly spotted a spiralling puff of smoke above the sand-hills—for all the world as if a giant were smoking his pipe.

“Dust-storm in the morning, shepherd’s warning,” he mused with some anxiety.

Losing no time, he drove his flock down into the lee of the hill out of the wind’s onrushing path. Meanwhile, his dog raced about worrying the sheep into order: once sheep start to panic, there’s no holding them; their heads bowed low to the ground, they scatter wherever the wind drives them.

Not so the proud camel: he plods along head high, chest out into the teeth of the storm.

In no time the sand-storm was upon the shepherd and his sheep. The wind howled, the dust blotted out the sun, blocking the shepherd’s





view more than two paces ahead.

Huddling in his cloak, he lay alongside his flock while the storm whistled fiercely about them. Thunder rumbled through the heavens, scaring the sheep. They ran helter-skelter over the sands; and though the shepherd set off in pursuit, he was soon knocked off his feet by the blustery wind. The sand clogged his eyes, nose and ears; it grated in his teeth. There was nothing for it but to outwait the storm—he could not stumble blindly into the gloom.

By morning, the wind had abated and he could crawl from under his sandy shelter. Yet when he glanced about, there was not a sign of his animals—neither dog nor sheep. The wind had seemingly swallowed them up.

As he scoured the sandy wastes, he came upon a little brass object—the bell worn by that old billy-goat who led his flock. Now if old Serkeh had lost his bell, misfortune was in the offing—for the bell's tinkling could be heard for miles around, so guiding the shepherd to his sheep. How would he find them now?

Hastening back to the village, he quickly rounded up a search-party and for four days and nights they searched the desert... Only on the fifth did they find the flock: and where were the sheep? All of a hundred miles from the pasture!

The flock was grazing calmly beside a disused water-hole—every single ram and ewe. And all thanks to the faithful dog. For five days the old fellow had suffered hunger and thirst, never leaving his post. There he now sat, alert and bright-eyed, wagging his tail happily at the sight of his master—as if to say, “I didn’t let you down, did I?”





AKBAI

I want to tell you now about another dog of the desert—Akbai. He grew up and lived his days amid the sand dunes, herding flocks of sheep. He became the scourge of those desert wolves: none were a match for the brave Akbai.

Sometimes the cunning pack leader will split her forces in two: the smaller she'll send in a head-on attack so as to distract the watchdogs, while the main group she'll lead in from the rear. That way the pack can slay several sheep and make off with its booty.

But old Akbai was wise to the ways of the wolf; and he knew his sheep. Nothing could trick him away from his post.

All the same, the sheepdog was growing old. Soon it was time for his master reluctantly to return him to the village. Let the old fellow live out his days in the cool shade of trees, with smooth grass beneath his paws.

Before leaving for the desert, his master, old Chary-aga, chained up Akbai with orders not to let him loose for a day or more—so that he would not follow the shepherd into the desert. Naturally, old Akbai barked and tore at his chain the whole day through and half the night.





And no sooner did they unchain him than off he set out over the sands without a glance at his plateful of scraps. It was the toughest journey of his life—two hundred miles across the burning desert with no water or company to help him on his way.

When he finally arrived at the camp, Akbai sank down by the bowl of water and drank and drank and drank... Then, his tired old head drooping, he dragged himself to his kennel to rest, but not before firmly nudging aside the new young guard-dog.

At the sight of his old friend, Chary-aga could not stop the tears from coursing down his cheeks. He went up to Akbai, squatted beside him and gently rubbed his ear as he whispered a guilty apology.

Old Akbai whimpered complainingly at first, as if chiding his master, but his tail soon began to wag, showing how happy he was to be welcomed and wanted again.





A LESSON IN CARRYING WATER

One time I visited Chary-aga and Akbai at their desert camp. The old shepherd gave me a snack and a bowl of refreshing green tea, then said,

“Well, my lad, if you’re bent on being a shepherd, you’d better get the hang of the job. It seems a simple business, this shepherding, but, mark my words, it takes a lifetime to learn. So I’m going to teach you your first lesson. See that camel? I’ve slung a couple of cans across his back: ride him to the well and fill them for me, son. That water’s so much fresher for making tea.

“But there’s one thing: if on the way your camel starts to nibble the grass or stray from the track, let him. Don’t beat him and don’t dismount. You can take Akbai with you for company.”

So the three of us set off: Akbai, the camel and I.

On we plodded, on and on, yet there was no sign of that well. Only later did I learn it was a good dozen miles off. No mean distance for a boy. My camel stamped along, munching the grass and skirting all the sand dunes. All the while, Akbai would be chasing gophers and scaring the wits out of the hares.

After a time we passed an old traveller.

"Hey there, sonny," he called, "where do you think you're going at this time of day? It'll soon be dark."

I informed him of my errand, and he shouted,

"What! You're inviting trouble crossing the desert with dusk nigh—even though the well's not far."

At that he tried to seize my camel's halter, meaning to turn us about; but Akbai suddenly grabbed him by the seat of his pants.

"Down boy! " I shouted angrily.





But that stubborn dog turned a deaf ear; only when the traveller released the halter did Akbai let go.

Off trotted my camel unconcerned.

"Urge him on," shouted the old fellow. "It'll soon be nightfall; you'll lose your way in the desert."

"I will," I called back. But I still obeyed Chary-aga's command: don't urge the camel and don't dismount.

So I kept my word and let my camel have his head. And to my relief we reached the well in no time at all. As we neared the oasis a raggle-taggle of dogs came charging at us, barking and baying from all sides. Yet no sooner had they caught our smell than they began wagging their tails as if greeting old friends. In the wake of the dogs came a lad, some five years older than me. Of course, I sat there tall and haughty on my camel, as if to tell him, "Look at me up here, I've crossed the desert, you know!"

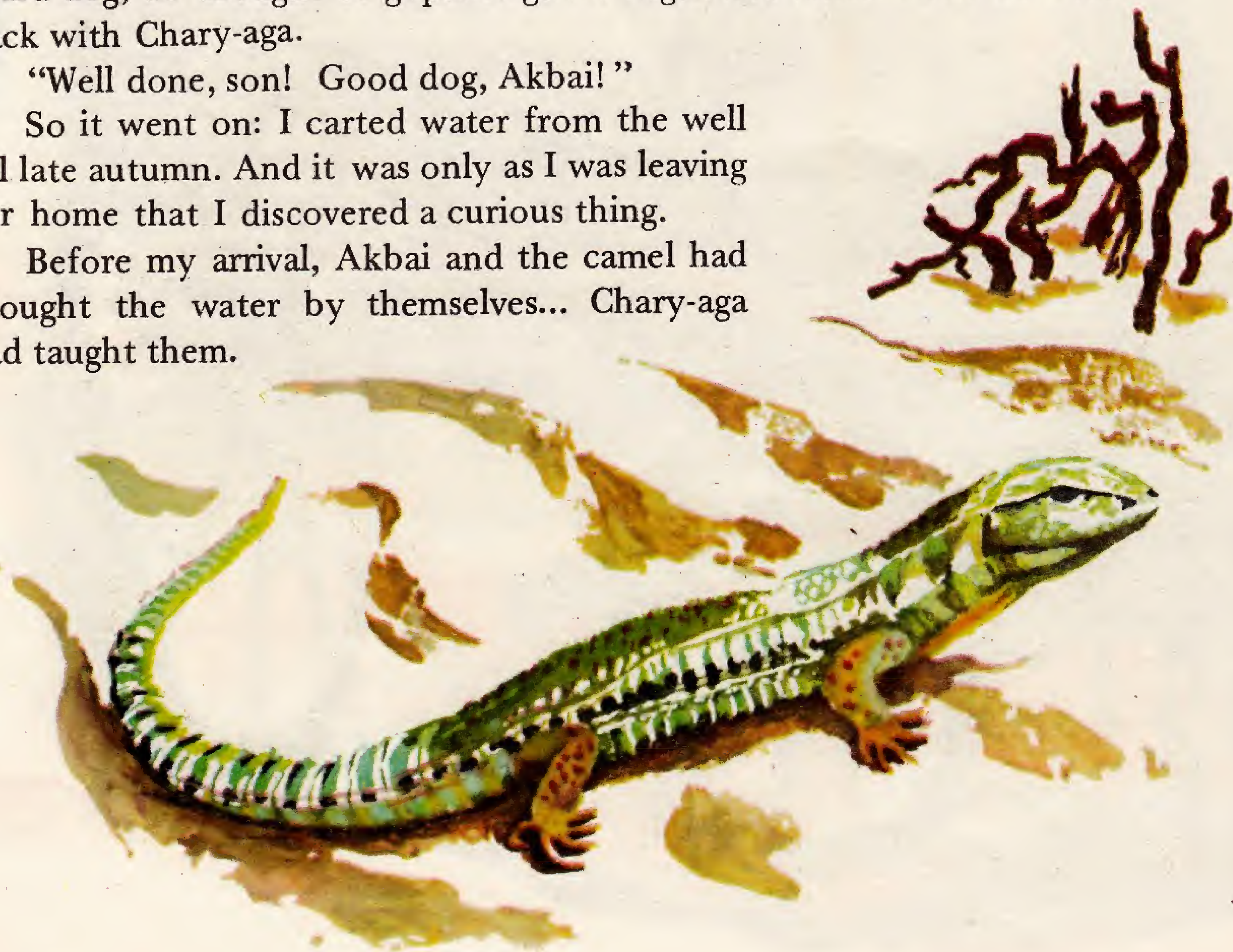
With a curt nod of his head, he pulled my camel to its knees, filled our cans and waved us off—as if I were a mere fly on the camel's rump.

Up got my camel and turned back. Now there was no holding him: he strode out for home ignoring the tempting grass and marching straight through the dunes. And Akbai scampered alongside like a guard-dog, all thought of gophers gone. Night had fallen when we were back with Chary-aga.

"Well done, son! Good dog, Akbai!"

So it went on: I carted water from the well till late autumn. And it was only as I was leaving for home that I discovered a curious thing.

Before my arrival, Akbai and the camel had brought the water by themselves... Chary-aga had taught them.





THROUGH THE EYES OF A SHEPHERD

One time a small caravan of geographers was crossing the black sands of the Kara Kum. The men had had a lonely, friendless fortnight in the desert with nothing but sand and camels for company until they reached the Kizylyar well—the camp of five shepherd households, three of them Kazakh, two Turkmen.

The geographers were on their way to the famous desert wildlife sanctuary at Repetek, but chanced upon the shepherds in the midst of their feast. The hospitable shepherds were naturally delighted to greet the weary travellers and share their food with them, treating them as their own.

After the customary *shurpa*—mutton soup, and the *beshbarmak*—meat with noodles, the party set about the main business of drinking tea ... and, of course, talking.

Fear of drought was uppermost in everyone's minds. Spring was drawing to a close, yet the rains had not yet come; the grass was scorched the colour of dull brown corn. How were the animals to be fed?

"Stop groaning," came a rough voice. "You'll all be drenched to the skin by the time the feast's out!"

It was Chary-aga. He was taking his seat upon the festive rug after penning his flock for the night.





"And how do you know that?" asked the head geographer. "The sky's quite clear."

"Ah-ha, my little camel-colt!" laughed the old shepherd. "I know that as sure as I knew yesterday your party would be here today."

"Chary-aga, you talk in riddles."

"It's as plain as the tail on the sheep's rump," replied the old man. "I drove my sheep in your tracks for fear of being late for the party. Listen, my little lambs, you've spent just a few years in school and college, while I've had a lifetime of schooling in the desert. The black sands were my teacher: I sold your crowd my best camel ten years back, and that animal brought you here today. I'd know his tracks anywhere: you tell a person by his face, an animal by his tracks."

"Well then, Chary-aga," said the geographer, "let us into your other secret. What makes you so sure it'll rain soon?"

"There'll be rain all right! On the way here, my sheep huddled together as if battling against a wind, keeping their heads close to the ground. That's a sure sign of rain."

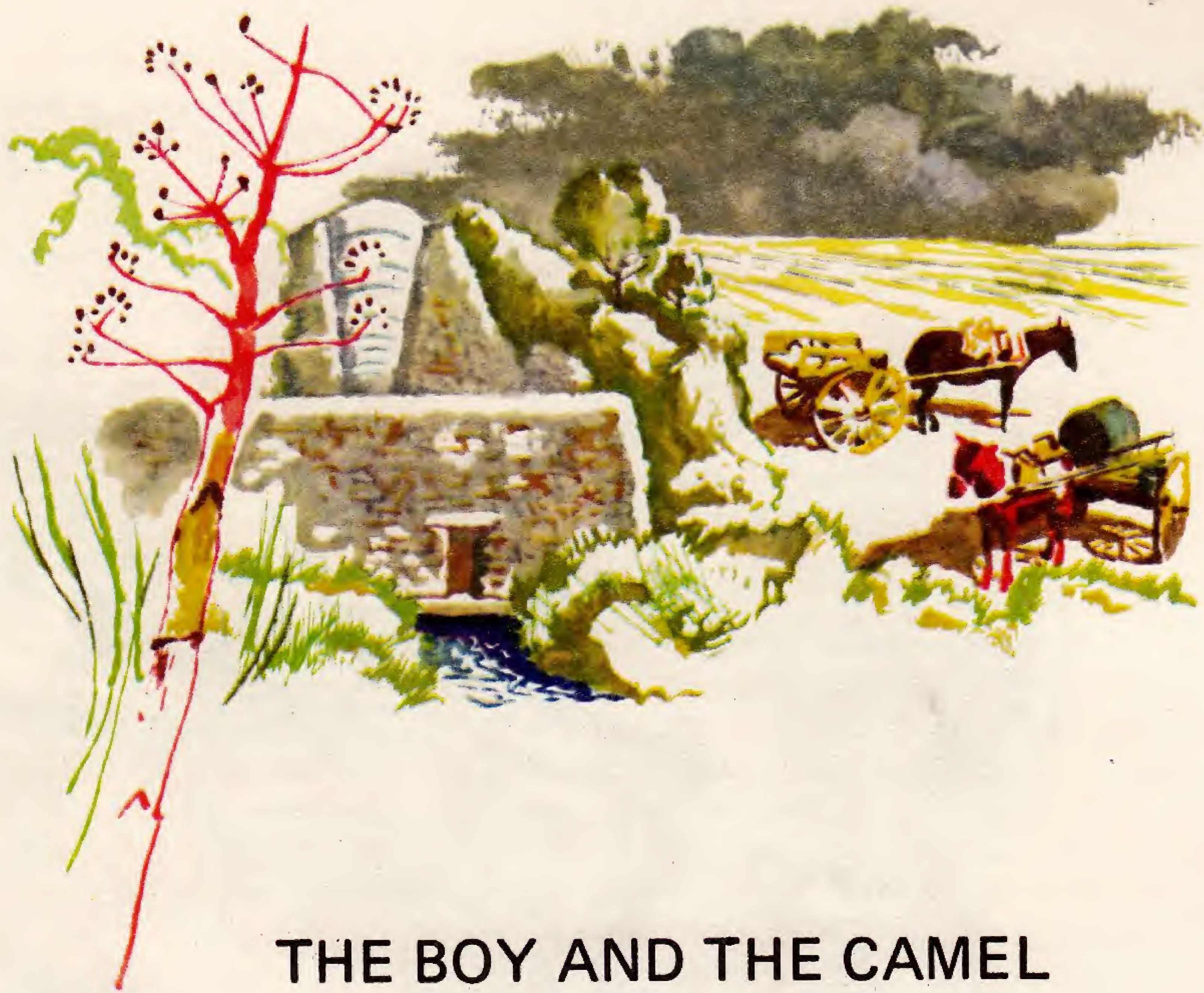
The men were wary all the same: the sun was beating down as mercilessly as ever; no cloud was to be seen in the sky, nor was there a wisp of a breeze on the dusty air. But the old shepherd was proved right. Even before the end of the feast, a strong wind blew across the sands, driving storm clouds across the skies.

And down came the rain.

When the party of geographers set off for Repetek, their feet sank into the wet sand and their eyes marvelled at the freshness of the desert grass and flowers which bloomed before their gaze.

The wet sand smelt moist as of a river.





THE BOY AND THE CAMEL

The camel was known as Bayir-holm (Big-as-a-Mountain)—so big and strong was he.

And when he grew old, his master stopped using him for work: let the good old servant end his days in peace and quiet. Yet that camel had other ideas. He had grown used to human kindness, a friendly pat, a kind word, a playful tug at his big shaggy ear. Being idle didn't suit him one little bit.

One day, a boy came up to Bayir-holm with a crust of bread.

"I'm Murad," he told the camel. "And you're Bayir; let's be friends."

Murad started coming to see his friend each day, bringing food and stroking him. The old camel would lie on the ground to please his young playmate, even offer him rides on his bumpy back.

Towards the end of May, when the desert grasses were already parched, Murad took Bayir to gather firewood. The clumsy bundles of straggly desert brushwood were not at all heavy, but the camel carried them on his back as proudly as if he were laden with costly wares from the Orient. He was working again and helping people.

On one such outing, the boy and the camel came to a distant clump of saksaul trees rich with dry tinder. Murad gathered a goodly pile, working





happily under the midday sun; but he soon felt dry and very hot. It was then he recalled with shame that he had left his water flask at home. And since home was some distance away, it was better to seek water nearby in the old *takyr*. The *takyr* was an even shelf baked hard by the sun on the site of a dried-up lake. Murad knew the *takyr* should contain small water pools.

He could see it from afar, glinting like a mirror in the sun, its surface white with salt from the earth.

At first Bayir stepped firmly across the shelf, then pulled up short, stubbornly refusing to budge.

"Come on, Bayir," Murad reproached him. "It's a tidy step home from here; we'll both be in a sorry state with no water."

He would have slid from the camel's back and run to a water-hole, but Bayir held his shirt in his strong teeth.

"What a funny mood you're in today," exclaimed Murad. "I only want a drink, it's so hot."

Bayir ignored him.

The ground underfoot was soft and springy, like a dried crust of pastry; but the boy's thoughts were only for slaking his thirst. The water-hole was no farther than a dozen paces. Shaking himself free of Bayir, he dashed forward ... and suddenly sank up to his knees. Though he tugged as hard as he could, he could not pull his legs free of the clinging sands. To his horror, he found he was slowly sinking—the sands were sucking him down and down. He stretched himself flat upon his stomach, but the treacherous sands still gave way and water seeped through the cracks.

"Bayir! " screamed Murad in panic.

The old camel well knew the danger: he made a few steps over the shifting sands, then lay on his belly and edged towards the struggling boy.

Though the sand sagged beneath the camel's bulk, Bayir hauled himself as close as he could to Murad, seized his shirt in his strong teeth and jerked him free of the sand. With a slurping smack, the quicksands closed in behind the boy who had escaped in the nick of time.

Murad embraced his friend, nestling his head gratefully against the beast's funny camel-head.

"Forgive me, Bayir," he begged his wise old friend. "Let's escape from here quickly."

The camel gazed at Murad with his sad, kind eyes, but did not move. Only then did the boy see that the sands had closed about Bayir and would soon swallow him up altogether.

“Bayir, old fellow, hold on!” shouted Murad as he quickly tore the bundle of dry twigs from his back and thrust them under the camel’s belly. Without glancing back, he raced home to bring help, as fast as his legs would carry him.

Many a time he stumbled and fell; often he had to crawl when the strength in his legs gave out. The thought that the quicksands would not wait urged him on—he had to save his friend.

With his failing strength, he reached the camp, thrust open the flap of a tent and whispered hoarsely,

“Save Bayir, he saved me...”

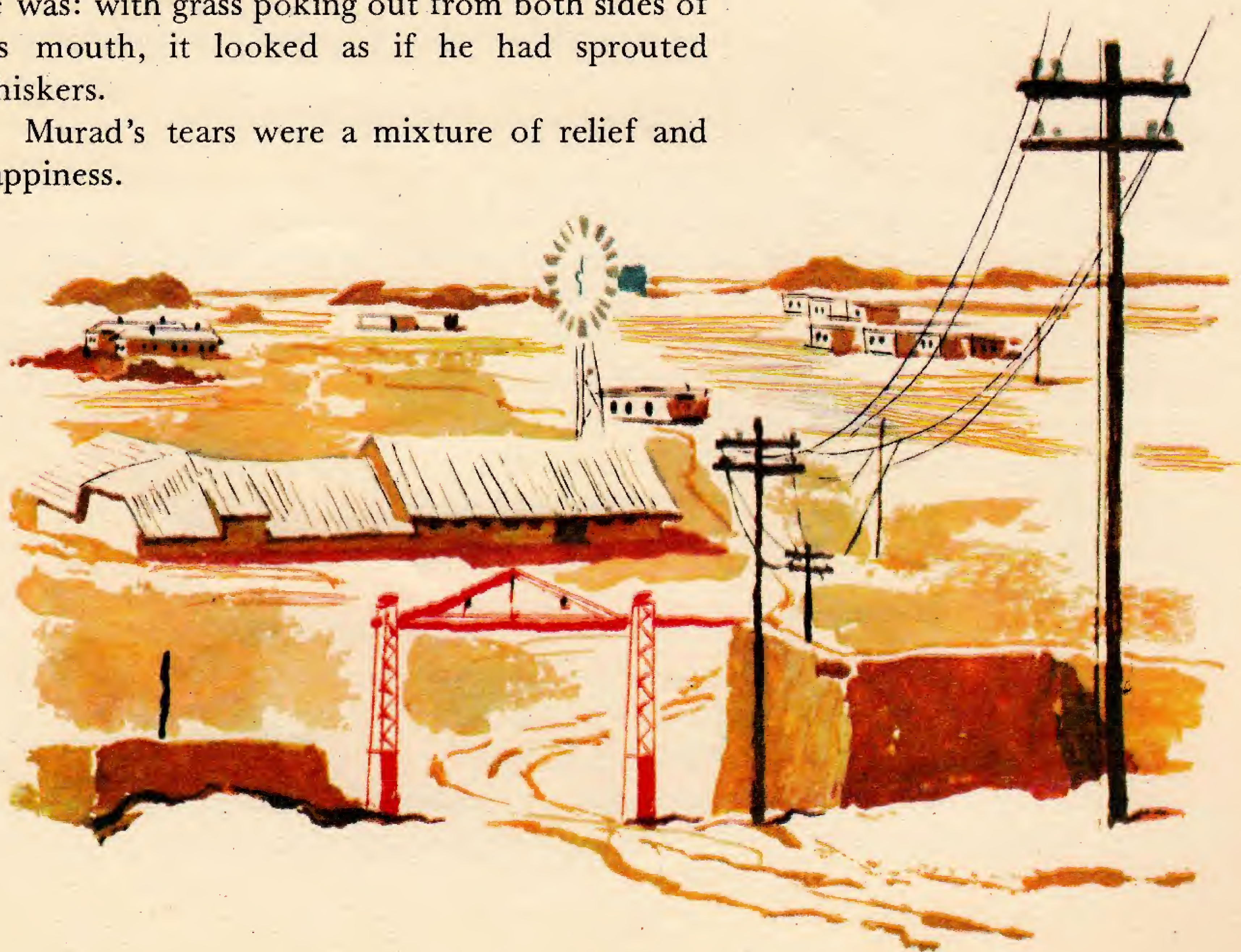
With that he fainted from exhaustion.

It was already morning when the boy came to. But there was no one about to tend to him—everyone had gone about their daily chores.

“Bayir!” he suddenly remembered jumping to his feet: his legs faltered, his head swam, but he somehow reached the door.

And there, outside the tent, stood Bayir munching contentedly. At the sight of the boy, the old camel stopped his chewing and turned his head. What a funny sight he was: with grass poking out from both sides of his mouth, it looked as if he had sprouted whiskers.

Murad’s tears were a mixture of relief and happiness.





OLD KULY

Kuly's father Yazkhan was a shepherd; and his father had been a shepherd, and his father's father before him...

Leaning on his crook Kuly stood still, a lone figure amid the sands, the most craggy, stark object on the landscape. In the distance, hanging above the hills, was the weary evening sun. They understood one another well, the sun and the shepherd; after all, their daily tasks followed a similar regular routine.

Ahead of Kuly were his sheep: a thousand and a half of them, grazing on the plain, tended by Kuly alone with his two dogs Sakar and Basar. Though the sun had now set over the horizon, the sands still breathed heat.

Over the summer, Kuly had withered and browned. But he had no complaints: not for the sun, nor the wind, nor the storm. Such was his lot: grit your teeth and take the buffeting of the sand and the snow, the spring torrents and the attacks of the wolf...

At nine in the morning Kuly had watered his animals; then sheep, dog and man alike rested, outwaiting the midday heat. And once the sun

slid towards the distant hills, the leader's bell startled the flock into motion.

Thus it was Kuly who was now listening for that tinkling bell. The leader of the flock was veering to the right, sensing the good food to come. In came the sheep to feed. Kuly followed several paces behind, then halted, leaning on his crook and gazing into the sunset: the crimson sunbeams winked a last farewell to the shepherd and sank to rest. Rest for the sun, but for Kuly work was just beginning.

"Till morning," called Kuly to the sun.

Those were the only words he uttered all day.

Darkness crept silently across the plains. And as it grew to engulf the heavens, a buoyant moon appeared, casting the gloom aside with its piercing glance, sending shadows scurrying down the gophers' burrows and melting into the sand.

When the moon had risen above the hills, Kuly led out his donkey from among the sheep and hung a bell round his neck. That donkey carried their food and water and if he were to stray during the night, man and beast would go hungry and thirsty.

At last the heat of the sands died down and a river of coolness slowly wended its way over the desert. The hills stood out in the moonlight bathed, it seemed, in a milky haze. So bright was it on the plain that grains of sand glittered underfoot like snowflakes.

The sheep nibbled on unperturbed.

The dogs at Kuly's feet rested their heads on tired paws; their eyes slept while ears jerked restlessly at the slightest rustle, as leaves fluttering in the wind. Everything seemed so peaceful. No wolf would dare attack the flock on a night like that.

To steal sheep you have to be artful. Sheep are a nervy, panicky breed: if wolves attack head-on, they stampede off. If wolves try to creep up from behind, they have the shepherd to deal with. And on the flanks prowl the dogs, Sakar on the right, Basar on the left.

The sheep grazed, the dogs dozed and the man gazed fondly at the moon, now high in the heavens. A gentle breeze had sprung up from somewhere. The heart felt light at that still, peaceful, moonlit scene.

About midnight the sheep stopped grazing and huddled together in the open to take their rest upon the cool sand. Kuly took down the provisions from the donkey, snapped several twigs and got a fire going.





Then he poured water into a copper kettle and set it on the fire to boil, leaving some in a rubber bowl for his dogs. Sakar drank his standing up, Basar lazily lying down.

Though the fire was small, it blinded the eyes; the man stretched his hands to the flames and felt the warm tingle spreading through his numbed body. When the water boiled in his copper *tunch*, Kuly made his tea good and strong: strong tea gives you strength, he reckoned.

Kuly sat some ten paces from the fire, wrapped up in his shaggy cloak. It's dangerous to stay long before a fire: it attracts all the creepy-crawlies of the desert, especially the poisonous desert spiders.

The deadly scorpion makes straight for light, his stinging tail poised to strike.

Kuly poured his first bowl of tea back into the kettle: let the tea mix well. When ready, he drank one bowl after another. It drove out the cold and thirst, sending the blood racing warmly through his veins.

The fire licked at the last dry twigs, then lay still as everything around. Even the moonlight seemed mellow. The stars came out, the dogs went on patrol, the flock snoozed.

Kuly had lain his crook beneath his head—the crook is the shepherd's hard pillow—and once more lay back gazing at the sky. Over there was the North Star, there the Great Bear stealthily creeping through the night; by dawn old mother bear would be in the east overtaking the North Star from below. And then the gay Pleiades would appear above the hills.


Kuly's father had taught his son the way of the stars: though he could neither read nor write, old Yazkhan had known the sky as well as any astronomer. He once told his son,

"Listen, my lad, in order to be at home in the desert you must know it like the back of your hand. And the sky you must know like your five fingers. Without knowing the sky you can't know the desert."

And so old Kuly lived at one with the sky and the desert, his constant companions throughout his lonely shepherd's life.







КАЮМ ТАНГРЫКУЛИЕВ
МАЛЬЧИК И ВЕРБЛЮД
На английском языке

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